

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks Following a Meeting With Secretary General Jakob Gijssbert "Jaap" de Hoop Scheffer of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

March 25, 2009

President Obama. Hello, everybody.

Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer. Hello, good morning.

President Obama. Hey, how are you doing? Well, everybody set up? I want to welcome the Secretary General. We just had an outstanding meeting. He has been a strong leader of NATO and we are very grateful for the service that he's provided. He's a great friend to the United States.

You know, we are about to celebrate the 60th anniversary of NATO at a summit in both France and Germany. It is a testimony to the strength of the transatlantic alliance, a testimony to the effectiveness of NATO in creating stability and peace and prosperity, laying the groundwork for so much that has taken place over the last several years.

We have a set of challenges that require NATO to shift from the 20th century to the 21st century—issues of terrorism, failed states, nuclear proliferation—a whole host of new challenges, as well as the traditional role that NATO has played in preserving the territorial integrity of NATO members.

And at this summit—the Secretary General and I have been discussing the agenda for the summit. We are confident that we can create a process whereby NATO, which is already strong, becomes stronger, where we become even more effective in coordinating our efforts in Afghanistan. As many of you know, we're in the process, this administration, of going through an evaluation, a strategic review of our approach to Afghanistan. And we expect to share that with our NATO counterparts. We've been in close consultation with them, and we believe that we are going to be able to ensure that the NATO members who have made so many sacrifices and have been working so hard already are reinvigorated and that the coordination that's going to be taking place will make it even more effective for us as we complete a successful NATO mission.

We've also discussed the role that NATO plays with respect to Russia and how this administration, my administration, is seeking a reset of the relationship with Russia, but in a way that's consistent with NATO membership and consistent with the need to send a clear signal throughout Europe that we are going to continue to abide by the central belief that countries who seek and aspire to join NATO are able to join NATO.

And finally, I thanked the Secretary General for his outstanding service. He is coming to the end of his tenure. I told him that he's a young man, so he's going to have to find something else to do, because he's an extraordinary talent. But he still has a lot of work in NATO to do just to get us through what is going to be a historic summit. And so I'm very grateful to him for taking the time to travel here.

Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer. Many thanks, Mr. President. For me, of course, it was a pleasure to meet the President of the United States, President Obama, for the first time here in the Oval Office in the run up, indeed, to the NATO summit in the beginning of April, so less than 2 weeks away in Strasbourg and Kehl, in France and Germany, in the heart of Europe, by the way, which is an interesting place to celebrate NATO's 60th anniversary.

But as the President already said, celebrating your 60th anniversary should not only be back to look at your successes, but also look ahead. And in Afghanistan, there are still major challenges. Many things are going right, but many things are not going right. We are, of course, waiting the results of the review going on in the United States of America, very relevant for the other allies, very relevant for NATO, and that review will certainly be discussed at the summit, Afghanistan being NATO's most important operational priority.

NATO's future will be discussed as well. The question: Is NATO going to have a new strategic concept, which brings to the surface a number of questions President Obama already spoke about—NATO's expeditionary capabilities, never forgetting NATO's core function, the integrity of the NATO territory, NATO's relations with Russia. We have many things on which we disagree, but NATO needs Russia and Russia needs NATO, so let's work on the things we agree on, and let's not hide our disagreements and let us realize that also this relationship can and in my opinion should be strengthened.

So it's a full plate at the summit, from Afghanistan to NATO-Russia to NATO's future. We'll greet, hopefully, two new members—NATO's door is open—Albania and Croatia in the family of democratic nations. And as President Obama said a moment ago, NATO's door will stay open for new members if they perform—if they fulfill the criteria.

And I'm quite sure that President Obama's administration, as we discussed in the past 45 minutes, is and will be a staunch supporter of the North Atlantic Alliance, because it was and is and will stay, Mr. President, a unique alliance, bringing the United States of America, Canada, and the European allies together. So it was a privilege to talk to the President. Thank you very much indeed, sir.

President Obama. Thank you.

Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer. Thank you.

President Obama. Thank you very much. Thank you, guys.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:33 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

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